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A

SERMON

PREACHED

TO THE FIRST CHURCH,

ON THE

CLOSE OF THEIR SECOND CENTURY,

29 AUGUST, 1830.

By N. L. FROTHINGHAM.

BOSTON:

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SERMON.

DEUT. XXXII. 7. — REMEMBER THE DAYS OF OLD, CONSIDER THE YEARS OF MANY GENERATIONS.

PSALM LXXVII. 5. — I HAVE CONSIDERED THE DAYS OF OLD, THE YEARS OF ANCIENT TIMES.

THE life of man is measured by years. The more lengthened existence of communities and states is counted in generations. Is it fanciful to think that in estimating the comparative duration of each, a twelvemonth in one corresponds to an age in the other? Threescore and ten revolutions of the sun fix the limits, that leave to the individual "no portion" or but a feeble one "in any thing that is done under" its beams. And threescore and ten of those periods, which are ordinarily computed to mark the successions of human life, are old age for a nation. None of the kingdoms of Europe yet approach that longevity of two thousand years, and most of them are youthful in comparison with it. If it has ever been surpassed by any of the ancient nations of Asia or Egypt, it was only to see their institutions overthrown, their memory a ruin, their very speech changed, and the stranger and conqueror pressing

upon the remnants of their faculties and the decrepitude of their strength. Thus it is that governments and states and tribes flourish and pass away, as well as the mortal man who mixes for a while his transient interests with them. The very land that we till seems to demand occasional respites of desolation. The great globe itself, if we may credit the testimonies of history and the analogies of reason, must have its alternations of ruin. For every thing there is a longer or shorter period, which we may grow wiser by contemplating. What is gone is always full of instruction for those, who are themselves hastening away. Moses, who lived in the early twilight of the world, commanded his tribes to "remember the years of many generations"; and David, with whom the fame of his nation began, employed himself in considering "the days of ancient times."

When we think of the broad circles of empire that have spread themselves and faded over the earth, we may be ready to look on the space, which the annals of our own community include, as a span. But in truth the two hundred years that it has already stood, are by no means to be accounted an inconsiderable time. Especially when we reflect, that it did not grow up, like most others, from obscure and slow beginnings, but started at once into active, independent, intelligent life;—feeble indeed at first through the smallness of its numbers, but with nothing about it of the ignorance of childhood or the rashness of youth. It was commenced on this side of the sea,

with all the improvement that ages had been working out on the other. Without any thing of the thoughtlessness of young and wild adventure, it was composed of as sober and resolute men as ever staked their all on a holy enterprise. Without any thing of fiction wrapt about its origin, its first words were those of a noble history, and the eyes of the most cultivated portions of Europe watched its growth here in the wilderness. One is impatient of those celebrators of the national independence, who speak as if our civil existence were scarcely to be dated earlier than the declaration of that event. It is as if one should date the deep foundation of England herself from her last revolution, which would make her half a century younger than we. The freest spirits of the freest nation then known founded the colony; and not a man of them but stood as erect on his rights at his first landing as any of his descendants have done since. Those rights were never relinquished for a moment. The fact is deserving of more attention than it has received, that in 1630 the full privileges of as free a charter as could then be framed by those who gave up all for that freedom, were publicly transferred from the soil of Great Britain to these poor shores in the West. The liberty, that was not permitted there, was by some strange concurrence which we hardly know how to explain solemnly guarantied here. And here it came to dwell. And from that day to this, in all the ways of prudence and bravery, it has been steadily maintained.

Two hundred years of such maturity are not to be spoken of lightly. It is a space bearing a good proportion to that, which gave the most refined people of antiquity all their glories of letters and art, and to that which meted out to the mightiest people that have yet risen on earth the most valuable portions of their dominion. With us every year has been a narrative of plain but vigorous life; while a great part of the history of nations is usually the fable of their beginnings or the tedious tragedy of their decline.

I am dwelling, perhaps, too long on a train of reflections, which every one who feels his New-England parentage, having once begun it, must find it hard to quit. As a child, however, of that honorable and pious descent, I must yet add one thought more to so long a preface, and bless God that our land was marked out as by a special Providence for the residence of just such men as came to look over the waters after its rugged but safe asylum. Before they established themselves in it, it was sought by the ambitious, that here they might set up their arbitrary establishments; but these soon went back to climates more congenial to the growth of temporal dominion and ecclesiastical pride. It was sought by the adventurous and licentious, but it repelled those with the rough touch of its deprivations and dangers. The counsels of princes, the plans of the worldly-wise, the efforts of the daring, all came to nothing as they turned towards it. It was reserved in the decrees of the Almighty for those only who were sustained by an inflexible faith, and thus fitted for the

great work which they were commissioned to accomplish. We may dissent from some of the points of that faith. We may wonder at some of them. But it gave those who held it a strength that no earthly principle could inspire. It gave them the success, for which every earthly motive was found vain. It helped them sow the land, when it was but just cleared of its forests, with those pregnant hopes of learning and religion, which no zeal short of their own could have made to grow. We are sitting under the blessed shade, into which those germs have spread; and it would ill become us to find fault with imperfections, without which the great work itself might possibly have been left imperfect. A severe education is often seen to be favorable to the individual man, leaving on his mind an abiding and salutary impression, a strong bent towards the right, while it permits him to forget something of the rudiments of its first instructions. The case is not otherwise with states. Who can doubt that New England owes the elements of her present character, and the institutions that make her peculiarly what she is, to the discipline of her Puritan ancestry, — though it may sometimes have seemed stern like her coasts and gloomy as her early fortunes? Who can endure to think, that instead of the deep principles of those thoughtful men, we might have had laid as the foundations of the country the rotten theories of irreligion and misrule, or any of the shallow devices of modern innovators?

Two centuries have passed since this church was gathered, — the first of the long line of churches in this populous town. Its records are older than those of the town itself, since it was formed before this peninsula was settled, or even the name now given to it was thought of. It was gathered under circumstances of peculiar affliction, when disease was thinning the little company, that had scarcely yet recovered themselves from the weariness of the sea and the desolateness of their new condition. In the spirit of a considerate and courageous sorrow, its first preparations were devoutly arranged. With solemn but humble forms were those preparations completed. Its first members belonged to a class of people, whom a high foreign authority has called "the most remarkable body of men which the world has ever produced." * The first name on its list is that of one, who in any age might be held up as a model of a magistrate and a Christian man. Its first covenant is distinguished only by its superior dignity and simplicity from those which are most commended at the present day. Its first assembly was under the shade of a tree on the other side of Charles River. Its first house of worship was on this side of the stream, and was built with mud walls and a roof of straw. These were lowly accommodations. Yet they corresponded well enough, not only with their situation at the time, but with their sober devotions at any time. For they

* Edinburgh Review, Vol. XLII, p. 337, Art. *Milton*.

had so long felt their minds constrained under high ceilings of chiselled stone, that they were glad of the poorest building which they could raise for themselves, and content with the freedom even of the tall forests which "were God's first temples." They had learned too from their own excited minds an independence of all outward state in religion. They needed none of it in their intense communion with Heaven. Their feeling of God's presence was too strong upon them to admit of being aided by any magnificence that belonged to this world.

Such were the beginnings of this church. They might seem melancholy to us if they were not so noble. They were like the beginning of the gospel itself, — a voice in the wilderness, — a cry to repent, but at the same time a promise of a kingdom of God at hand. If the history of the church had not been written already by one of its ministers,* this would not be the place to enter into any minute details concerning its progress. They might have been looked for a hundred years ago, when the first century sermon was preached by Mr. Foxcroft, whom several of my respected hearers can well remember, — so fast do our generations crowd on one another. They were not entered into then, and they could now be made neither interesting nor manageable. In the place of them, I will ask your attention to a few general results, drawn from a comparison between the elder days of the church and the present;

* The Rev. William Emerson.

with the view of showing, that while we should honor what was well done then, we should be grateful for our own superior privileges. It is natural to celebrate the past. I bless God that we find so much there to applaud and be grateful for. I would that the praise were ten-fold louder and more sincere among us than it is, so far as filial respect, and the most sacred remembrances, and the love of liberty and truth demand it. But let the admiration be discriminating. I would distinguish between the times themselves and the men who lived in those times. It is a distinction that is of the utmost consequence, though perpetually overlooked by panegyrists on one hand and cavillers on the other. We have to learn more reverence perhaps than we yet feel for our fathers and their compeers, — men, whose most eloquent praises have after all been spoken on the other side of the Atlantic. But it is quite another thing to applaud the state of opinions and manners at that period, — and a further extravagance still to depreciate our own as contrary to them. The cry of degeneracy and defection has become too old to be worth attending to. It was uttered from the beginning in various tones of lamentation. "Either I am in an apoplexy," writes one * within seventeen years of Governor Winthrop's landing, "or that man is in a lethargy, who doth not now sensibly feel the heavens trembling over his head and the earth under his feet; so that little light of comfort or counsel is left to the

* Ward's "Simple Cobler of Aggawam."

sons of men." Mr. Foxcroft in his century sermon bewails "the shaking times," as he calls them, in which he was born, and expresses his fears lest "Boston should have the reproachful name of Lost Town bestowed on it." Disregarding all these complaints and evil prophecies, whether of ancient or recent date, and in open dissent from those who would bring us back to the religious opinions and usages which we have forsaken, — I will lay my finger on a few points, which will prove to us that some advancement has been made in the course of two hundred years. "Remember," say some, "the days of old, consider the years of many generations," — as if our only safety was in the imitation of them. We reply, "I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times," and let us see to what purpose.

I. Two hundred years ago, there prevailed a set of scriptural impressions and interpretations, which our better light has exposed, but which gave a strong shade to opinions on government as well as faith, and threw a sort of spectral influence on the ordinary affairs of life. Rational and philosophical views of the Bible were unknown in the land; and yet the Bible was compelled to speak in all natural and unnatural ways on every subject of concern. The code of Moses was thought to be a fit pattern for modern legislation; and the project of a theocracy, which is in plainer language an administration of priests, was seriously contemplated. The tribes of Judah and Israel were supposed to offer suitable examples for those who had crossed into a new world. The ora-

cles of the prophets were believed to be predictions of what the passing and the coming days were to fulfil. Questions of sudden emergency, and difficulties that belonged to their peculiar situation, were settled by a reference to the Book of Kings or the Song of Solomon. I find the famous Mr. Cotton* tasking his acute mind to prove that a liturgy is a breach of the second commandment, which forbids the making of any graven image. Happy would it have been if such ideas of the Scriptures had been confined to verbal disputes, and outward usages, and designs that were never executed. But they had not always so innocent an ending. It was unluckily written in the Pentateuch, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." This law was enforced only fifteen years after the founding of the colony; and in the same century broke out that fatal infatuation, which we are unable to think of without horror and grief. Nothing would be more unjust than to charge this foolish cruelty upon our ancestors, as if the delusion was peculiarly theirs. I charge it against the superstitiousness of the age. The executions in England for that imaginary crime were very far more numerous than here, and it was punished with death by the authority of the most enlightened tribunals in Europe. It is not a hundred years since the presbytery at Edinburgh denounced the repeal of the penal laws against witchcraft as a national sin. And even this tenacity of error does not seem to me more strange than the words of a

* Way of the Churches of Christ in New England. p. 71.

Scottish historian* published but the other day, who suggests that there might have been "an actual appropriation of that mysterious agency, which Scripture assures us did once exist, and which no equal authority has ever proved to be extinguished." It was not so slowly that the men of New England learned wisdom.

II. Two hundred years ago the civil and religious interests of men were entangled together. The church stretched out its hand to the sword of the magistracy, and the magistracy girt its brows with the terrors of the church. This was no invention of our fathers. It was what they had received from theirs. They only did not wholly disclaim it. It was an impurity and an abuse, which their spirit of liberty, as it refined itself, was gradually to throw off. But there it was, — the occasion of perpetual disorders in their infant community. Theological disputes were accounted matters for civil jurisdiction. The governor and the pastor were seen either to withstand one another, or to join in the exercise of a common sway. The church, while it excluded from its communion all but the regenerate, — an exclusion which is still considered by some to have been a very scriptural and praise-worthy practice, — excluded also all but its members from the freedom of the political body. The rest had not the common rights of citizenship. This tyranny was indeed early resisted, and one

* Graham's History of the Rise and Progress of the United States of North America. Vol. I. p. 465.

synod after another decided in favor of their disfranchised brethren. I wish I could add that the First Church was found true, on that occasion, to the true cause. I wish there did not lie upon her the reproach of bitter dealings with her more liberal sister the Old South, who nobly went off from her at that time for liberty's sake.

III. Two hundred years ago, there was no such thing as toleration. In practice it was unknown, save of a few mild spirits; and even in open theory it was condemned and derided. "He that is willing," says a writer whom I have already quoted,* "to tolerate any religion or discrepant way of religion, besides his own, either doubts of his own or is not sincere in it. There is no truth but one, and of the persecution of true religion and toleration of false, the last is far the worst. It is said that men ought to have liberty of conscience, and that it is persecution to debar them of it. I can rather stand amazed than reply to this. It is an astonishment that the brains of men should be parboiled in such impious ignorance." Another thus expresses himself;† "The outcry of some is for liberty of conscience. This is the great Diana of the libertines of this age. I look upon toleration as the first-born of all iniquities. If it should be brought forth among us, you may call it GAD, *a troop cometh*, a troop of all manner of abominations." Most of the

* Ward.

† President Oakes's Century Sermon, 1673. Similar opinions might be quoted from Higginson's Election Sermon, 1663; Shepard's Election Sermon, 1672; Cotton's "Bloody Tenent washed," &c.

Puritans of this period thought it impossible that different sects should exist peaceably together in the same community, and even when oppressed themselves they exclaimed against universal toleration. But in this they only took part in a general sentiment. Even the philosophic Lord Bacon thought that uniformity in religious sentiment and worship was essential to the support of government. Who had taught them any better? Where were they to find any worthier example? Was not the whole world in arms against those principles, which they had come into a desert to enjoy? And was nothing to be allowed for men, who had made such dreary sacrifices? They had fled to the ends of the world, that they might have a way of their own. They invited none to share their "poor cottages in the wilderness," where they were "overshadowed," as their own beautiful language ran, "with the spirit of supplication." They warned all, who were not partakers of their own faith and feeling, to spare their tranquillity and leave them to their retreat. We cannot surely confound such men with vulgar persecutors. This would be injustice in any. It would be irreverence and ingratitude in us. Look at Europe, as it was at that moment, instead of inveighing against them. To say nothing of the circumstances that banished them from the land which they never ceased to love, James the First had, but a little while before, burnt at the stake two of his subjects for Arianism; and it was a considerable time afterwards that the great national edict of toleration in France was re-

voked by a bigotted and profligate king. Do not make it too hard against them, that they were not further in advance of the rest of mankind, — that they had not yet attained where none were perfect, — that they sometimes exercised, out of a deep love for what they deemed to be God's truth and their own right, a small measure of that power, which was employed elsewhere in the full insolence of despotism, by the cunning, the conceited, the ambitious and the dissolute.

We have gone back two hundred years. Change now the point of view. Come forward a short space. Suppose the last of those self-denying men who planted this colony to have rested from their labors. See what was accomplished in the course of that single generation, and you will need nothing beside for their defence or their eulogy. They had begun to build their own ships for their increasing commerce. They had stamped coin, which has always been classed among the exercises of sovereignty. They had founded a university. They had seen many of the most illustrious names in the mother land, even those of prelates and noblemen, associated with their spreading improvements. They left all the interests of the country flourishing. Boston alone contained fifteen hundred families; and intelligent strangers, who visited the provinces of New England, went back to tell of a state of order and enterprise, of refinement and hospitality, equal to their own, beyond the western waters. When was ever a generation that did so much? They have left their

monuments in the effects which they wrought, in the institutions which they bequeathed, in the prosperity which they established, in the characters which they bore, in the examples which they have made immortal.

I cannot conclude this discourse, already perhaps too long, without calling up the memories of those, who have been ministering servants to our church in the days that are gone. There will be time for little more than to speak out their names, as their solemn train passes before us. The first is WILSON. Associated with nobles in the English realm, he came here for religion's sake, to be installed teacher of a church in the open air, just two hundred years ago. Blessings on his meek head! His zeal had no mixture of sternness with it. He was a pattern of wisdom and gentleness, in an age that had great need of it all. — The next is JOHN COTTON. His fame was great in the colleges and congregations of his own country, before he crossed over to this. Boston received its name from the English town in Lincolnshire where he formerly ministered, and our institutions may almost be said to have been moulded by his extraordinary influence. Honor to so learned and commanding a man! though the venerable sweetness of his older colleague has more charms for me than either his learning or command. Some of his posterity are still worshippers with us, and the children of his present successor are his direct descendants in the seventh generation. — NORTON. He had neither

the soft, healing dispositions of the first, nor the bright gifts of the second. But his attainments entitled him to a better fate, than to be thrown into the whirl of political intrigues and disappointments, and to die of a broken heart. — DAVENPORT, the patriarch of New Haven, and of such celebrity as to be invited, together with Cotton, to the great assembly of divines at Westminster. He gave to this place but the feeble residue of his old age, and that little was tormented with disputes, which his best days would probably have done nothing to reconcile. Let him pass in peace. — ALLEN. His protracted ministry seems to have been rather occupied with silent usefulness than adorned with any renown. OXENBRIDGE, on the contrary, was honored during a short career. He was struck with death in the very act of conducting the services of the Lord's house. — MOODEY was the first child of New England who officiated in this church. His benevolent and intrepid mind should now be commemorated the rather because the sour prejudices of his own times did him wrong. — BAILEY and WADSWORTH and BRIDGE were men of a faithful heart, whom no body of Christian believers on earth need have been ashamed to acknowledge. — The labors of the diligent FOXCROFT offer much to be commended; though we may well account it a serious exception to the praise, that he admired the fanaticism of Whitefield, and censured the liberality of Tillotson. — With CHAUNCY a new era commenced. He viewed religion with naked human eyes, and not in unreal visions, or through the discolored and distort-

ing medium of technical systems. He looked upon the world, and was not afraid to bind up his hopes in the common hopes of mankind. He looked up to heaven, and its throne was to him filled with the unclouded radiancy of love. He beheld the churches agitated with a storm of religious excitement, and he rebuked both the winds and the sea. — None of you need to be reminded of the excellent graces of CLARKE. The regrets for him are still warm, though his amiable features have long been dust. He had the virtues of Wilson with a better creed, and like Oxenbridge he was smitten, as he stood in the pulpit, by the angel of death.—EMERSON follows next. There are many affectionate recollections among you of his zeal as a minister and his extraordinary social worth. You rejoiced but for a little while in his mild light. He was cut off in the midst of his active and devoted course, but he has left the characters of his children to praise him in the gate. — Then, like the shadow that his early promise has become,— scarcely seen but to depart, scarcely speaking among you but to expire, — passes the friendly ABBOTT, and closes the line.

There is one more name, however, to which I cannot refrain from giving utterance. It is that of him, who was all but yours, and who would have been wholly so, perhaps, if one less worthy had not been called to occupy his place. It is M'KEAN. I see in your eyes how well you remember that ardent and noble spirit. He was the friend of us all; and I am sure there is no one here, who, if called by any cir-

cumstances to the island where he died, would not inquire for the place where he rests, and piously remove from his green grave any coarse growths that might make it unsightly.

Brethren, I have endeavoured to fulfil a duty, which, at the return of a new century, seems to be demanded by the living and the dead. I have "considered the days of old, the years of ancient times." But who can confine his imagination to the past? A hundred years more! What have they in reserve to show after their revolution is ended? Nothing for us. They will scarcely find the children of our children alive. But may they have blessings to shower down on the church of God, whose date is not measured by centuries, and on the immortal cause of human good!

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